

## Effective Teamwork

The following is a chapter excerpt from Michael Schmoker's book, *Results: The Key to Continuous School Improvement*, Second Edition. For more information, feel free to contact Mike Schmoker at [schmoker@futureone.com](mailto:schmoker@futureone.com).

*The best thing to invest in right now is collegiality. The number one skill that teachers will need is to be team-based, collegial, sharing their knowledge and wisdom.*

—Alan November 1998 (p. 6)

*Teams get results.*

—Katzenbach and Smith 1993

In Chapters 1-3, I examine the key components that favor results and improvement: teamwork, goals, and the selective and judicious use of data. Individually, they have limited impact; combined, they constitute a powerful force for improvement—without necessarily consuming large amounts of time or money (though, if properly spent, more of each is always desired). Together, these elements cannot help but promote better results in any context, as the many school examples in these pages will affirm.

Success depends on the interdependency between collaboration and goals; between both of these and purpose. Though teamwork is fundamental in this scheme, it is "the means, not the end" (Katzenbach and Smith, 1993, p. 12). Similarly, Huberman says that collegiality is not a "legitimate end in itself unless it can be shown to affect...the nature or degree of pupil development" (Huberman, in Fullan 1991, p. 136). Chapter 1 defines and discusses the importance and interdependence of effective team collaboration, goals, and data, essential yet often misunderstood issues.

### Teacher Isolation

When Thomas Edison was asked why he was so prolific an inventor, he replied that it was a result of what he called the "multiplier effect." He placed his team of inventors near each other to encourage them to consult with one another so that each member of the team benefited from the collective intelligence of the group. His teams not only worked better but faster (Smith 1985).

We must acknowledge that schools would perform better if teachers worked in focused, supportive teams:

Collegiality among teachers, as measured by the frequency of communication, mutual support, help, etc., was a strong indicator of implementation success.

Virtually every research study on the topic has found this to be the case (Fullan 1991, p. 132).

Unfortunately, teacher isolation—the opposite of teamwork—is one of the most obvious realities of a teacher's life (Lortie 1975). Lortie saw the negative effects of this isolation: "Teacher individualism is not cocky and self-assured; it is hesitant and uneasy" (p. 210). Such isolation promotes professional insecurity. Many teachers, comfortable in their isolation, may find the transition to teamwork a little daunting. But the teachers Lortie (1975) interviewed were wise enough to know that the limited, hermetically sealed world of the classrooms they inhabited did not favor their growth or a sense of confidence that they were doing a job well. Why? Because, as he discovered,

Individualism combines with presentism to retard the search for occupational knowledge. Teachers who work in isolation cannot create an empirically grounded, semantically potent common language. Unless they develop terms to indicate specific events, discussion will lack the clarity it needs to enlighten practice...Individualism supports presentism by inhibiting work with others in a search for common solutions. Teachers do not undertake the collegial effort which has played so crucial a role in other occupations (p. 212).

This passage is worth rereading. The first point it makes is that teachers, the front line in the battle for school improvement, are working in isolated environments that cut the lifeline of useful information. Such isolations thwarts them in developing common solutions through dialogue. Isolation tacitly assumes that practitioners have nothing to learn from each other. When I look back on when I taught English, nothing is more apparent to me than the fact that isolated experience, by itself, was not the best teacher. And I had virtually no opportunity to learn from my colleagues. We did come together for periodic department meetings, but that type of gathering is not what is meant here by collaboration or teamwork.

The crush of what Lortie calls "presentism" —of myriad daily events and duties—kept us from reflecting collaboratively on such obvious and challenging concerns as how to teach composition more effectively, how to conduct discussions about literature more effectively, and how to make literature exciting. We did not know if or how anyone was teaching composition—or even what that meant. So we worked, consciously or unconsciously, toward our own goals, within the limitations of what each of us knew and did not know. Day-to-day concerns kept us from reflecting on what our most important goals should be.

The absence of a common focus and, by extension, common solutions, can be explained by the absence of what Goodlad (Goodlad et al. 1970) calls clear-cut, specific goals for school at all levels of responsibility. These kinds of goals can only be obtained when professionals regularly collaborate and communicate in an effort to define and reach such goals.

An irrational and indefensible isolation continues to prevent professionals from learning from each other. The bottom line is what kids continue to miss out on as a result.

Isolation is unique to the teaching profession and, by implication, to the whole educational system (Lortie 1975). This observation should shock us, as it did Donald Peterson (1991),

former president of Ford Motor Company; Peterson was dismayed by the isolation in which teachers work. A number of circumstances account for this situation: "the organization of space, time, and task seriously constrains interactions" (Little 1990, p. 514); and "the traditional school organization minimizes collective, collegial behavior" (Donahoe 1993, p. 299). School systems in other countries do a far better job of creating regular opportunities for productive planning and interaction (Stevenson 1998).

Because so much inhibits work-related teacher interaction, we might be persuaded to believe that this problem is insurmountable. Not so, as the teacher teams highlighted in this book demonstrate. Everyone in the educational community must work diligently to change the structures that impede teamwork. But meanwhile, we must take advantage of the opportunities that already present themselves—and which others have demonstrated can eventuate in better results.

## Benefits

Teachers at Donaldson Elementary School in Tucson, Arizona, were reluctant to spend large chunks of their early-out times in meetings supposedly intended to promote "continuous improvement." But when they began to see collective progress, a direct result of their focused collaboration, the meetings became more meaningful. A good example is what happened when we discussed a key weakness in 2nd grade writing: students' difficulty in writing descriptive settings. After the team brainstormed, a team member proposed having students first draw then describe in writing the setting they imagined for their stories. The number of students able to write high-quality descriptions went from just a few to almost the entire 2nd grade class.

Evidence for the benefits of collaboration, rightly conducted, are overwhelming. The nature of the complex work of teaching "cannot be accomplished by even the most knowledgeable individuals working alone" (Little 1990, p. 520). In the typical school, however, teacher practice is "limited to the boundaries of their own experience," without any outside scrutiny or objective analysis. Such boundaries introduce a "conservative bias," which is the enemy of risk and innovation and a recipe for perpetuating the status quo at a time when change is manifestly necessary (Little 1990, pp. 526-527). Little found a strong relationship between the right kind of collegiality and improvements for both teachers and students:

- Remarkable gains in achievement.
- Higher-quality solutions to problems.
- Increased confidence among all school community members.
- Teachers' ability to support one another's strengths and to accommodate weaknesses.
- The ability to examine and test new ideas, methods, and materials.
- More systematic assistance to beginning teachers.
- An expanded pool of ideas, materials, and methods.

Little also quotes Lortie to make the point that the prevailing isolation in which teachers work does little to "add to the intellectual capital of the profession" (Lortie, in Little 1987, pp.

501-502). In the business of teaching and school improvement, intellectual capital—ideas, fresh solutions, and effective teaching methods—is the most precious commodity.

Business literature from theorists such as Tom Peters and W. Edwards Deming is equally as emphatic about how teamwork benefits intellectual and professional capital. For Deming, "there is no substitute for teamwork"; without it, "dissipation of knowledge and effort, results far from optimum," exists (1986, p. 19).

An excellent resource for this topic is *The Wisdom of Teams* (1993) by Jon Katzenbach and Douglas Smith. Their study of teams in 47 organizations corroborates educational studies by educators like Judith Little and Michael Huberman. "It is obvious that teams outperform individuals," that "learning not only occurs in teams but endures" (Katzenbach and Smith 1993, p. 5). Teams "bring together complementary skills and experiences that, by definition, exceed those of any individual on the team...bringing multiple capabilities to bear on difficult issues" (Katzenbach and Smith 1993, pp. 18-19).

Both author Michael Fullan (private communication 1998) and Dennis Sparks, Executive Director of the National Staff Development Council, have recently remarked that effective collaboration is perhaps the most effective form of staff development. For Sparks,

The image of the future would be a group of teachers sitting around a table talking about their student's work, learning and asking, "What do we need to do differently to get the work we would like from the kids?" (1998b, p. 19)

We must not undervalue research or the best kind of staff training (the subject of Chapter 5). Nonetheless, as Fullan and Hargreaves (1996) point out, we often underestimate teacher expertise—which emerges in the right kind of focused, targeted teamwork. They exhort us to "avoid creating a culture of dependency among teachers by overrating the expertise of published research and underrating the practical knowledge of teachers" (p. 24). We need more—lots more—of both research and optimistic, instructionally-focused collaboration. Teachers—this may surprise us—learn best from each other (Rosenholtz 1991). The best research on teaching is grossly underused. But it is often the logistical and practical knowledge of teachers that makes or breaks the successful implementation of a research-based strategy or program. And we have all seen improvements occur without the help of published research.

Two 1st grade teachers at Prince Elementary School in Tucson, Arizona, have been getting exceptional results for years with students from one of its least advantaged areas, many of whom arrive with very limited skills. What they have learned from each other has enabled them to ensure that an exceptional percentage of their students leaves 1st grade able to read and write on grade level.

Thunderbolt Middle School in Lake Havasu City, Arizona, adopted the highly effective, research-based "Accelerated Reader" program. But no program is context-proof. The two Title I teachers at this school met regularly to review data on progress and to brainstorm for solutions to time and logistical problems—which will always be with us. As a result of this dialogue, the program—and the results—improved significantly.

At Wilkerson Middle School in Birmingham, Alabama, teacher teamwork was the key to immediate, dramatic improvements in every category and at every grade level. Their home-grown strategies and programs led to a 26-percent increase in reading; schoolwide math gains included a 46-percent improvement in the 6th grade (Cox 1994).

In the area of reading improvement, a tremendous opportunity may await us. I am always impressed with what happens when teachers meet to honestly scrutinize and improve their early elementary reading program after carefully reviewing the research on the improvement. Teachers from Peck Elementary School in Arvada, Colorado, chose reading as one of their improvement goals. We met one afternoon to (1) review the research on effective reading instruction and then (2) refine instruction, structures, and time allotments to conform to best practice. Fullan is right: Progress is indeed "a social process." The teams worked both within and among the grade levels to share and develop complementary strategies to ensure better results. At every grade level, the teachers helped one another to see opportunities for significant, positive changes that they could not have implemented by themselves.

As Judith Little discovered, the right kind of teamwork leads to a more effective examination and implementation of best practice. Research, by itself, has had less impact than we would like. Let's face it: The solutions to many local, personal, and logistical problems simply aren't spelled out in the research. In Lake Havasu City, teams focused on improved reading performance. This led to a districtwide examination of best practices and programs. This study required us to review our own resources, to collaborate yet further to allocate those resources, and to invent and then adjust structures and new procedures. This combination of best practice and ongoing collaboration led to better results at several schools—most of them coming in the first year. A school with the district's highest poverty rate—72 percent—made particularly dramatic gains at the end of the 1998 school year.

Collaboration works. And it also addresses an essential social dimension of improvement. Successfully implementing innovative procedures "is very much a social process" (Fullan 1991, p. 84). Studies show that people who are members of effective teams "consistently and without prompting emphasized the fun aspects of their work together" (Katzenbach and Smith 1993, p. 19).

I was struck by this same spirit in dozens of workers from the Toyota plant in Kentucky. When I visited them, miles away from their employment, an ex-jockey told me that on Sunday evenings, he "couldn't wait to get with his team to hit the ground running on Monday mornings." Meaningful, purposeful collaboration addresses the social and emotional demands of teaching (Little 1990). And we should not underestimate the social significance of Little's observation that effective collaboration creates that rear arena in which teachers can receive credit and praise for their "knowledge, skill, and judgment" (pp. 18-19). Teamwork provides opportunities to enjoy the social and psychic satisfactions of collective effort.

## **The Dark Side of Collegiality**

In the face of all this evidence, why do we persist in denying these benefits to the profession? The explanation can be found in our failure to be results oriented. Industry is littered with stories about "quality circles" that came and went. Why? Few realized any palpable results, and so they were regarded as a waste of time—the kiss of death for any innovation. Similarly, many teachers find their first attempts at collaboration clumsy and unrewarding. Subsequently, the time they spend in meetings appears to take away from lesson planning and instruction. Predictably, "unproductive" meetings are abandoned (Little 1987, p. 493).

Unproductive, unrewarding meetings—we have all been to them. And because of these experiences, many people simply do not believe that teams perform better than individuals. Katzenbach and Smith (1993) saw how "members waste time in unproductive discussions, which cause more trouble than they are worth...and actually generate more complaints than constructive results" (p. 20). They regard this problem as a lack of discipline and disciplined action, which embodies the essential conditions that favor productive collaboration.

We must clearly distinguish between effective collaboration and the appearance of teamwork. We can begin by stating what teamwork, for the purposes of this book, is not. "The term collegiality has remained conceptually amorphous....Much that passes for collegiality does not add up to much" (Little 1990, p. 509). Similarly, the word *teamwork* "courts imprecision" (Katzenbach and Smith 1993, p. 19). Much of what we call teamwork or collegiality does not favor nor make explicit what *should* be its end: better results for children. The unfortunate reality is that most of what goes on in the name of collegiality is ineffective or counterproductive. "Most alliances among teachers" are not task oriented at all. Instead, they "appear to be informal, voluntary, and distant from the real work in and of the classroom" (Little 1987, p. 507.) This kind of collegiality not only consumes valuable time but can also promote the consequences of isolation that we deplore:

I argue that the most common configurations of teacher-to-teacher interaction may do more to bolster isolation than to diminish it; the culture that Lortie described as individualistic, present oriented, and conservative is thus not altered but is indeed perpetuated by the most prevalent examples of teacher collaboration and exchange (Little 1990, p. 511).

Alas, the weaker, more common forms of collegiality "serve only to confirm present practice without evaluation its worth." Collegiality may "supply sympathy of the sort that dissuades teachers from the kind of closer analysis of practice that might yield solutions to recurrent problems" and thus accounts for continuing practices that are its ostensible enemy (Little 1990, p.517). Less formal kinds of collegiality accommodate, even promote, the course of least resistance. This characteristic is part of the "dark side" of collegiality (Fullan 1991, p. 131).

The "bright side" (if you will) is found less frequently. It is rooted in a concern with results, with what Little calls "joint work" that affects gains and classroom performance and involves monitoring student progress and the "thoughtful, explicit examination of practices of their consequences" (Little 1990, p. 519). Huberman writes that collegiality "is not a fully

legitimate end in itself, unless it can be shown to affect...the nature or degree of pupil development" (Huberman, in Fullan 1991, p. 136).

The bright side of collegiality can be found at Northview Elementary School in Manhattan, Kansas. Students realized huge gains between 1983 and 1989, when teachers began to collaborate. In reading, 4th and 6th grade scores on district achievement tests rose from 59 to 100 percent, and from 41 to 97 percent, respectively. In math, 4th grade scores rose from 70 to 100 percent; 6th grade scores, from 31 to 97 percent. How? Principal Dan Yunk began to arrange for teams of teachers to meet routinely to analyze scores, identify strengths and weaknesses, and develop ways to effectively address them (Schmoker and Wilson 1993). Something powerful happens when teachers begin to regularly discuss instructional challenges and their solutions.

### **Collaboration as Action Research**

Effective teamwork that leads to results is a discipline—and requires a scientific disposition. The experience of teams I have worked with confirms Little's 1990 findings that collaboration is not often enough characterized by a "thoughtful, explicit examination of practices *and their consequences*" (p. 519, emphasis added). Effective collaboration is really action research—carefully conducted experimentation with new practices and assessment of them.

### **Listen Before You Leap**

To be more effective, teams must resist the impulse to leap prematurely to solutions and actions. Before selecting and elaborating on a potential solution, we should carefully consider (1) its consistency with what we know from pertinent research and (2) our sense of its probable or potential impact on student learning. To take full advantage of the collective expertise of the team, we can listen carefully—and nonjudgmentally—to each other's best ideas (brainstorming is a fast, efficient way to do this both well and quickly). Listening helps to ensure that we select the best of several alternatives. The collective wisdom of the team can then inform the all-important direction the team will take. This kind of thoughtful approach will have a high payoff in student learning.

### **Provide Follow-Up**

Another problem is lack of follow-up, the failure to begin each meeting with a concise discussion of what worked—and didn't. Too many meetings begin *with no reference to commitments made at the last meeting*. A teacher at an elementary school recently informed me that he and his colleagues were "burned out" on brainstorming (a method we were using to generate and select effective reading improvement strategies). His frustration was justifiable. He was tired, he said, of filling chart paper with ideas and that is the end of it—no

follow-up on if or how well the ideas had even been implemented or if they had in fact helped students learn.

Careful, methodical follow-up, essential as we know it to be, has not been education's strong suit. But if we want results, a scientific, systematic examination of effort and effects is essential—and one of the most satisfying professional experiences we can have. For all the relentless search for better methods and structures puts the odds of improvement heavily in our favor.

## Create Effective Structures

Collaborative teams must carefully design the format for their work (see the Appendix for a suggested format for an effective 30-minute meeting). Participants should arrive knowing that the meeting will open with questions like the following:

- Were you able to successfully implement the strategy we decided to try at the last meeting? (e.g., provide more time for sustained silent reading).
- What was the impact of the strategy on learning and achievement? What evidence or results can you report? (e.g., students read more fluently or performed better on comprehension tests when we provided more silent reading time; student work revealed growth in an identified area of difficulty or weakness).
- What difficulties did you encounter? (e.g., students are selecting books that are too easy or too difficult for sustained reading time).
- How can we overcome these difficulties? (e.g., by developing a system with the librarian that ensures that students select books at appropriate level).

When the group is ready, it can move on to the next most urgent learning problem relative to the measurable goal (e.g., many students are still having difficulty comprehending main ideas from their reading).

Then the group might do the following:

1. Carefully explore a variety of possible alternatives in light of collective deliberation or proven practice—through brainstorming or discussion of a research-based strategy.
2. Carefully select a strategy or solution that they believe has the greatest potential for impact.
3. Commit—as a team—to experimenting with the new strategy and to being ready to report on student impact and implementation at the next meeting.

Successful teams need to have such focused interaction on a fairly regular basis—probably once a month for each student learning goal that we set. Experience has taught us that any less than six strategically scheduled opportunities per year can kill momentum and severely jeopardize the chances of improvement.

## Teamwork That Gets Results

Teams in Amphitheater Schools began to brainstorm for solutions to student problems they had identified by using data. A team from Holaway Elementary School met regularly and used data to determine that the greatest area of difficulty in solving multistep math problems was students' ability to write out the steps that led to math solutions. The team then generated possible strategies:

- Provide students with good examples and models of what the writing should look like.
- Ask students to write each step as they complete it, rather than write the entire problem after they have completed the problem.
- Share the writing rubric more explicitly with the students; give them copies.
- Ask students to start their explanation for each step with the phrase, "I did this because."
- Require that students self-assess their work against a specific rubric before they hand in their work.

These ideas were among others that the team generated during only seven minutes of brainstorming (the entire meeting took only about 30 minutes). Implementing these ideas brought the team closer to its improvement goal by the next month. Such activity generates "intellectual capital," and by not tapping into it, we deny teachers and students a precious and essential resource in helping greater numbers of students receive a higher-quality education.

A good example attesting to the power of teamwork, clear goals, and data analysis is Adlai E. Stevenson High School in Lincolnshire, Illinois. Teachers work in department teams that conduct ongoing analyses of performance data. Superintendent Richard DuFour said that each team meets once a month to collaborate. They analyze results at least four times a year, and the times are built into the calendar. Nine times a year, students come to school at 10:30a.m. to give teachers time to collaborate. Many schools have benefited from such late-ins and early-outs, which have been incorporated into school schedules across the United States.

At Stevenson High School, what happened when time was provided for results-oriented teamwork? In 1985, before the process was introduced, the school did not rank in the top 50 schools in the 13-state Midwest region. In 1992, when goals were established and collaborative time was instituted:

The school ranked first in the region, and by 1994, it was among the top 20 schools in the world....Last year, the school established new records in every traditional indicator of student achievement, including grade distributions, failure rates, average ACT scores, average SAT scores, percentage of honor grades on Advanced Placement examinations, and average scores in each of the five areas of the state achievement test (DuFour 1995, p. 35).

## Administrative Collaboration

We have been speaking of teacher collaboration—which is of primary importance. But there is a precious shortage of achievement-focused administrative collaboration. It is well documented that as often as administrators meet, they seldom discuss student learning issues; instead, they focus almost exclusively on procedural or political matters (Smith and Andrews 1989). What would happen if administrative teams carved out even 30 minutes, once a month, to more directly share and discuss triumphs and frustrations, to identify problems, and then brainstorm for ideas and solutions for managing academic improvement?

Just imagine the benefits if administrators began to do their own action research on effective ways to promote a culture of effective collaboration and data-driven improvement? Have administrators nothing to learn from each other? Can we afford to assume that they will learn all they need about improvement on their own? If we can't engage in such action research at the district level, how can we expect teachers to engage in it at the grade and site level?

In many school districts, such discussion is long overdue. Administrators and schools and students have everything to learn and much to gain from doing so.

## The Need for Hope and Optimism

For all we have said about an intelligent, scientific approach to improvement, there is an element that transcends any method or mechanism or approach. It is the attitude and spirit of the team.

For starters, learning always requires a measure of humility. Fullan and Hargreaves (1996) found that improved schools are marked by a profound if seemingly obvious feature—the belief that they will never stop learning. As we have seen, there is a strong strain of independence in the teaching profession. It is not always easy to admit that there may be a better way to teach something than the way we have always done it.

Unless...

- the team believes strongly in each member's capacity to develop practical solutions to everyday teaching and learning problems;
- there is a belief that regardless of a school's social or economic circumstances, improvement can and will occur, gradually, but inexorably; and
- the team arrives at each meeting anticipating that informed trial and error will inevitably lead to better teaching and hence to higher learning,

...then no mechanism or set of practices will succeed.

To help us maintain this hope, we must celebrate and elevate success. We should regularly read and learn about schools that have overcome great odds. Staff development in practices

that have manifestly had an effect on learning must be a regular feature of our school life. This should not be left to chance. *One of the primary roles of the staff development or district office staff should be the collection, dissemination, analysis, and discussion of success stories from within and outside the district.* Through such positive and proactive means, we can fill the air with hope and optimism about the results that are, in fact, within our reach.

Good teamwork among grade-level, department, school, and administrative teams will give us results we once only dreamed of. Chapter 2 defines the most salient feature of good teamwork, or the "serious collaboration," which Little found to be so rare (1987, p. 513). We have already touched on it: the importance of clear, specific performance goals.

Excerpted with permission from Results: The Key to Continuous School Improvement, Second Edition by Mike Schmoker (schmoker@futureone.com)